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Settling in the Right Way



Playing by the Rules

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Your first day of graduate school will be a whirlwind of introductions, handshakes, sightseeing tours, and dozens of pick-ups and drop-offs of forms and parking decals and more forms. Oh, and there will be a lot of information, piles of information, mountains of information! For most of the first week, it will feel like drinking water from a fire hose. Much of the information those first days of graduate school will tell you what to do and what not to do. These are the written rules of the graduate program, the department, and the university as a whole. There are rules for where to park on campus, policies on intellectual property rights, lists of required courses, and many, many deadlines for things like financial aid, the dissertation process, and ordering your cap and gown for graduation.

With all of that information, you should be well prepared to settle in for your first semester as a graduate student. Presumably, you will know exactly what you need to do to earn your degree and when to do it. However, even with the mountain of information handed to you on that first day, there is an even taller mountain of information that you will need to succeed that is not written down. These are the informal, unwritten rules of the “game.” One of your authors often refers to doing well in graduate school and one’s subsequent academic or professional career as “playing the game.” Students who know how to play the game well typically excel in graduate school. This characterization of graduate school as a game is not meant to belittle or degrade its importance but rather to illustrate that, like many activities

in life, there are rules, tradeoffs, and strategies that can help you succeed. Much like learning the “tricks” to win a video game or board game (e.g., buy up as much property as you can in the beginning rounds of a game of Monopoly!), you can learn how to play the game of graduate school more intelligently and more effectively. And much like games you learned as a child, there are written rules (three strikes and you’re out) and rules you hear from other players (hit the ball toward Jason, he can’t catch worth a darn!).

Learning these rules, both written and unwritten, and then playing the game using these rules will give you a tremendous advantage in graduate school. In fact, taking some of these rules to heart may make the difference between completing your program successfully and stalling midway and then dropping out. Unfortunately, the possibility of the latter is more common than you might think. The Council of Graduate Schools (2005) reports “. . . previous studies suggest that, while the majority of students who enter doctoral programs have the academic ability to complete the degree, on average only 50 to 60 percent of those who enter doctoral programs in the United States complete their degrees” (p. 22). Why is this? Although there are innumerable reasons why graduate students drop out of a program, from financial to family issues, academic ability does not appear to be one of them. For some who do not finish, they simply may never have learned how to play the game well.

Learning the rules will also help you achieve what Bloom and Bell (1979) call “superstar” status. Superstar graduate students stand out from the crowd and exhibit a number of specific behaviors, including being visible in the department, working hard (and making sure faculty see you working hard), reflecting the values of the program, working closely with faculty, and what they termed the “W” factor whereby students made faculty feel worthwhile and rewarded as teachers. The superstar students are the ones faculty contact when opportunities arise, such as research participation or coauthoring a conference paper, and you want to make sure, as you settle in, that you start earning this label.

In this chapter, we hope to convey two simple but valuable lessons to help you settle in. First, you need to find the rules of the game. Second, you need to start playing by these rules sooner rather than later. In other words, the key to settling into your first semester in graduate school is to quickly and accurately figure out how to play by the rules; the formal, written ones and the informal, unwritten ones. Let’s begin with how you find the rules of the graduate school game.

Finding the Rules of the Game

The formal rules of graduate school are relatively easy to find. They are contained in that large packet of information you received at orientation and quickly shoved into a desk drawer. They are contained in the dozens, perhaps hundreds, of e-mails you will soon begin receiving from the administrative staff, faculty, department chair, and university. Even more formal rules are to be found in the graduate catalog, with pages and pages of policies and procedures you need follow to earn your degree.

But how does one find the informal rules of the graduate school game? In some cases, basic trial and error will provide you with a number of valuable, perhaps painfully acquired, lessons you will turn into rules. One of your coauthors learned, on his first day of graduate school, that a grey t-shirt, a long walk across campus,

and a “meet-and-greet” session with the incoming class of students does not mix well with the heat and humidity of a Florida summer. He eventually cooled down, and his sweat-soaked shirt began to dry, but for weeks he was known as the “sweaty guy from Colorado.” Another good source of informal rules is the experience of students and teachers captured in journal articles, online blogs, and books like the one you are holding right now. For example, Walfish and Hess (2004) describe nine strategies for successfully completing the Ph.D. drawn from the comments of a recent graduate student in a clinical psychology program. These include “Don’t make the mistake of thinking that graduate school is just like undergraduate school in terms of how you can behave and present yourself,” “Always be nice to office staff (secretaries, office managers, receptionists) at your graduate program,” and “Accept feedback gracefully” (pp. 145–147).

Similarly, in Chapter 4 of this book, Susan Burns describes perhaps your best source for informal rules: the relationships you will develop that first semester, from finding the right advisor to the value of peer mentors. These relationships are so important to learning how to play the game that you should start the process right away. As you go through that first day, look around you; the current students, the faculty, the department chair, and the administrative staff will all have some insight into playing the game well. Some of these suggestions may seem obvious (“Get to class on time, read the book, and participate in class discussions”), some will seem peculiar (“Dr. Smith gets really upset when you use the word *methodology*”), and some will seem downright ridiculous (“If you can incorporate a *Star Wars* reference into your answer, you’ll score points with Dr. Jones”), but try and remember all of them. No single suggestion will make or break your graduate career, but taken together, they provide a collection of tricks to help you get ahead.

Unfortunately, keeping all of the informal rules straight is no easy task. Some of the advice from others will seem contradictory. During his doctoral program, for example, one of your coauthors was told by a professor to spend all of his time studying because “graduate students don’t get Bs,” yet not a day later, another professor told him to focus on gaining research experience, even if it meant getting Bs or Cs in his classes. In addition, there are informal rules for different aspects of your graduate experience. When settling in that first semester, you will hear suggestions to help you in at least four main areas: (a) emotional adjustment and stability, (b) physical health, (c) the social dynamics of the program, and (d) professional and scholarly development. Let’s explore each of these areas in more detail so that you can be on the lookout for good advice and begin collecting the informal rules of the game from day one.

Emotional Adjustment and Stability

Without a doubt, the first semester of graduate school will be a period of adjustment for you. You may have moved to a new location, leaving family, friends, or significant others. You might be living on your own for the first time or be recently married and now must learn how to balance school with family commitments. Whatever your particular situation, the transformation from undergraduate student to graduate student is a major one, and part of settling in successfully is learning how to adjust emotionally. Students who have already made this adjustment are your best source for informal rules on how to handle the stress of increased workloads,

where to turn for help and support, even the best places to hang out on a Friday night to meet others and relax. Learning how to deal with stress is also important in that you want to keep your emotions in check when in classes or at practicum sites. As Walfish and Hess (2004) note, “Everyone has bad days and good days and upsetting events occur, but try as much as possible to keep that from coming out when you are in the role of graduate student” (p. 145).

Physical Health

Similar to emotional stability, you need to learn how to keep yourself physically healthy. We know many students will pull the “all nighters,” replacing sleep with studying and water with coffee and Red Bull, but in general, you should strive to stay rested, get physical exercise, and eat well. One of your coauthors often asks his students how much they slept the night before and what they had for breakfast. Although the data are anecdotal, students getting 3 to 4 hours of sleep and whose breakfast consists of a candy bar and a soda are far more likely to crash and fall asleep in class than those getting 6 to 7 hours and eating a well-rounded meal. Will you be labeled a superstar student if professors routinely see you sleeping in the back of the class? Furthermore, Beck (2003) notes that the habits you develop in graduate school will influence the habits you keep during your career, including a good balance between professional activities and personal needs (for more on this point, see Chapter 10 of this book).

In terms of exercise, finding ways to stay physically fit can serve two purposes. One, exercise is an excellent way to relieve stress. And two, physical activities, such as intramural sports or simply meeting a few friends at the gym, are an ideal way to meet fellow students and build your network of social support. For example, some of our students formed a running club. They meet once a week for casual runs with lots of conversation and fun while training for local races.

Social Dynamics of the Program

Almost every organization, from a Fortune 500 company down to a local Girl Scouts troop, has a unique social dynamic, and a graduate program is no different. The “politics” of a department influence who makes decisions and who gets along with whom and often organizes students, faculty, and staff into seemingly disparate and conflicting “cliques.” Learning the rules of your program’s particular political climate is crucial to avoiding uncomfortable situations or overstepping your boundaries. For instance, be wary of students, even faculty, who badmouth others in the department. Avoid the temptation to get involved in these debates because you don’t want your own negative comments to make their way to the wrong person. Keep in mind, you may work with any of the faculty during your time in the program, even later in your career. The same can be said for fellow students. A terse comment, said in haste, could come back to haunt you.

On this point, it is worth noting that social networking websites, like Facebook, are just as open to scrutiny, if not more so, as face-to-face conversations in the department. Because many students and increasingly faculty are on these sites, one negative comment about a professor or student can travel with lightning speed. One of your

coauthors has actually seen all of the following comments posted on a Facebook wall by students in his department (luckily, he was not the subject of these rants):

“Dr. Blank is such an idiot! He has no clue what he’s talking about most of the time.”

“I didn’t learn a thing in Dr. Blank’s class! What a waste!”

“I didn’t study at all for that exam. Didn’t need to, got the answers from blank.” (blank being another student whose identity was clear, thus incriminating both for cheating)

“Sitting in Dr. Blank’s class right now. . . . BORING!!!!”

And, as the old saying goes, actions speak louder than words. By actions, we mean evidence of actions represented by the pictures students post on social networking sites. One of the quickest ways for you to harm your reputation in the department and alter your role in the social dynamics of the program is to post a picture of a drunken escapade or inappropriate behavior, especially one that gets a lot of attention and discussion. We are not advocating students avoid having fun, but if the fun crosses a line, then be smart enough to not advertise it to your peers and professors.

Professional and Scholarly Development

A majority of the rules you need to learn for the graduate school game will focus on your development as a scholar and professional. If you look at chapters in Section II of this book, developing and maturing as a graduate student encompasses a number of skills and abilities. To settle in the right way, start looking, right away, for opportunities to gain experience in writing, teaching, clinical and counseling activities, research, and giving presentations.

As we have already mentioned, one rule of the game is getting to know the faculty because they provide opportunities to gain these experiences. For example, an invaluable skill is being able to give an effective verbal presentation. Although many students dread public speaking, the more you do it, the easier it becomes. You can practice your presentation skills, for instance, by giving a paper at a conference. You may have already done this as an undergraduate student, but if not, you should definitely start searching for conferences during your first semester and, with the submission deadline dates in mind, start planning how to gain the research or applied experience that will become the subject of your conference submission. Likewise, you can partner with a faculty member on one of his or her presentations.

Another excellent opportunity to practice your presentation skills while gaining valuable teaching experience as well is to volunteer as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) in the department. There is perhaps no better way to learn how to speak in front of people than preparing and giving a class lecture. Obtaining a GTA position, however, is easier said than done. Faculty select GTAs based on which students demonstrate reliability, competence, and motivation in their classes; so, from the first day of the semester, know that your potential as a GTA is already being assessed.

Faculty are also a great resource for gaining experience in research, and you should start looking for these opportunities as you settle in. We advise you to start small and start humble. In your first semester in graduate school, it is unlikely a faculty member will select you to head his or her research lab or to run a major

research project. Granted, you may have all the necessary skills and expertise (well, this is probably not the case, but we want you to feel confident as you settle in!), but you have to prove that you have the “right stuff.” Doing so requires you to build up a string of successes, working from smaller, seemingly mundane tasks, like scheduling research participants for a study, to more difficult and exciting tasks, such as helping design or conduct a research study (or, better yet, having a hand in the always exciting data analysis process where your training in statistics is on display). You want to prove to your advisor that you are reliable, capable, and motivated, and the best way to do so is through your actions. In our experience, students who can be trusted with small tasks are the ones we choose to take on big tasks.

Research skills also involve learning how to acquire research funding. As you will see in Chapter 19 in this book, finding funding sources and developing research proposals is a key part of the research process in academia. Although many of our students avoid this component of research like the plague (“I have to conduct a thorough literature review? Yuck!”), the smart ones, the ones who understand the importance of keeping research dollars coming into a laboratory or department, seek out ways to get experience in the process. And although we cannot speak for all faculty, we are sure a good number would agree that a student who can help put together an effective research proposal is a tremendous asset and would be highly sought after in the department.

Getting to know the faculty and learning their areas of research interest and expertise will also greatly enhance your scholarly development, for these are the people who will involve you in activities that add lines to your curriculum vitae. Tenenbaum, Crosby, and Gliner (2001) found that help from advisors contributed positively to academic productivity in the form of presentations and publications, as well as students’ satisfaction with their graduate experience.

Finally, getting to know the faculty will help you graduate, as one of them will ultimately serve as your major advisor and/or chair your dissertation committee. Yes, as you settle in, it is already time to start thinking about your dissertation. You don’t need to have the experimental hypothesis solidified by the end of orientation, but it is never too early to start making plans for what you need to do to earn the degree, and one of most important things is selecting your dissertation chair. As described in Chapter 20 of this book, finding the right person to serve as your chair and, later, the right committee, is an integral part of the dissertation process.

Applying the Rules of the Game

At the beginning of the chapter, we described our hope that you would learn two valuable lessons for how to settle into graduate school the right way. The first was how to find the rules of the game, and we offered a number of suggestions to help you achieve this goal. Our second lesson can be summarized in two words: Start now! We realize the first semester of graduate school is hectic. There are many changes in both your personal and academic lives. Nevertheless, the sooner you start applying the rules of the game, the more successful your graduate experience will be. Don’t make the mistake, for example, of waiting a semester, or even a year, before meeting the faculty and staff in the department. Don’t delay seeking out opportunities to volunteer on research projects or make your interest in a GTA position known.

And keep in mind that building your reputation among your peers, the faculty, and the staff starts on day one. Take advantage of social activities organized by the department or other students as a way to let others get to know you. In short, once you have learned the rules of the game, start using them right away to speed your development into a superstar student.

As an illustration, let's look at the experience (albeit manufactured to make a point), of two very different students with two very different approaches to settling in. The first, we'll call him Jason, began his graduate career by showing up a week after orientation. When he did attend classes, about 50% of the time, he was often late and would quickly fall asleep in his back-row seat. His Facebook wall was replete with stories and pictorial evidence of late nights partying and days at the beach (when he should have been in class). During his first several semesters, Jason avoided the department and would only stop in to get a form signed by the chair or copy entire textbooks on the department copy machine. Participation in research and teaching were nonexistent as he focused on perfecting his tan and his surfing career, and when asked to join student clubs in the department, his response was always no. Of course, when it was time to start his dissertation, 6 years later, Jason was surprised and frustrated that none of the professors wanted to help him go from proposal to defense in 4 months. Sadly, Jason left the program ABD—all but dissertation—and took a job selling surf boards.

In contrast, the second student, we'll call him Steve, began his graduate career by attending all of the orientation-week functions and introducing himself to fellow students, both incoming and current, every member of the faculty, and the office staff. During his first semester, Steve attended every class, sitting up front and not only staying awake but engaging in class discussions and group projects. After class, he would spend time in the department, volunteering to assist professors with classes or organize student social activities, and continued to build relationships with faculty. In his first year in the program, Steve was hired as a GTA, volunteered in a research lab running participants, and coauthored two conference presentations. He soon found the perfect academic advisor, who would later become his dissertation chair, and began developing an idea for his dissertation. At the end of 5 years in the program, Steve's dissertation was complete and his curriculum vitae was full of dozens of conference presentations, coauthored book chapters, and a few highly prized peer-reviewed journal articles. After graduation, he was quickly hired as an assistant professor at another university and paid a salary of nearly \$300,000 (okay, that last part is pure embellishment).

Conclusion

Of course the experiences of Jason and Steve represent extreme examples of playing the game. One never even tried to learn or apply the rules; the other not only learned the rules well but also applied them immediately. It is our hope that you will fall somewhere in between these examples (hopefully more toward Steve) as you begin graduate school. We also hope you find your own unique way to become a superstar student. Some students make their mark in the area of research, impressing faculty with their dedication and proficiency for writing research proposals, designing research projects, collecting and analyzing data, and publishing results in journals. Others focus on developing their teaching skills or gaining applied experience as counselors.

Wherever you choose to make your mark, learn how to play the game from the beginning. Graduate school can be one of most exciting and enlightening periods of your career, and starting out the right way, by learning how to play by the formal and even more important informal rules, can set you on a course to success.

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- Tenenbaum, H. R., Crosby, F. J., & Gliner, M. D. (2001). Mentoring relationships in graduate school. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 59(3), 326–341.
- Walfish, S., & Hess, A. K. (2004). It's not just about grades: One student's strategies for successfully completing the Ph.D. *Constructivism in the Human Sciences*, 9, 143–149.

Suggestions for Further Exploration

- Delamont, S., Atkinson, P., & Parry, O. (2000). *The doctoral experience: Success and failure in graduate school*. New York: Falmer Press (an e-book version [2005] is published by Taylor and Francis e-Library and available at www.ebookstore.tandf.co.uk). With a broader focus on doctoral programs in the social and natural sciences, this book offers many insights into helping you develop as a scientist and earn your Ph.D. Chapters cover valuable lessons on supervision in the research process, the different cultures and challenges between university departments and academic disciplines, and science in the laboratory and in the field.
- Kuther, T. L. (2008). *Surviving graduate school in psychology: A pocket mentor*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association. Kuther's brief yet informative book provides a wealth of practical advice on surviving graduate school. Of particular value are her tips for practicing for interviews, sample curriculum vitas (CVs), guidelines for graduate teachers, and strategies to tackle the dissertation process.
- Peters, R. L. (2007). *Getting what you came for: The smart student's guide to earning an M.A. or a Ph.D.* (rev. ed.). New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. This comprehensive resource addresses all stages of the graduate school process, from criteria for selecting a school to searching for a job. With specific regard to playing the graduate school game, see Peters's chapters on managing yourself during the program, playing politics and building your reputation, the thesis process, and social interactions with fellow students and faculty.
- Walfish, S., & Hess, A. K. (Eds.). (2001). *Succeeding in graduate school: The career guide for psychology students*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. This book addresses many of the concepts introduced in our chapter with sections on considering a career in psychology, mastering the politics of graduate school (a big part of playing the game well), the internship process, and learning skills for your career developing as a professional. Of particular value are chapters on developing mentoring relationships and dealing with the stress of a graduate program.